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AUTHOR Steller, Arthur W.
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ABSTRACT

With 50 percent of all principals planning to retire in the 1980's, hiring good principals should be a matter of planning rather than chance. This pamphlet notes the strategies that can help to ensure that a district hires effective educational leaders as principals. Developing effective job descriptions and interviewing techniques, though essential, can be supplemented with assessment center observations, in which administrator candidates are observed in model job situations for several days and rated according to the important skills needed by successful principals. Academic leadership training institutes, such as those at Harvard, the University of Oregon, and Butler University, also provide workshops to improve administrators' instructional leadership skills. Finally, superintendents and school boards can identify and prepare future principals in five steps designed to support a district's commitment to administrative excellence. (JW)

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Chart a course for selecting new principals

by Arthur W. Steller

An accumulating body of data and opinion concludes that "effective schools have effective principals." Research into why some schools are successful—in spite of such disadvantages as an inner city environment, inadequate funding or facilities, or students coming from low income or single-parent homes—supports the premise. While school systems making educational advancements usually are headed by outstanding superintendents and informed boards, the school principal is the key actor in school improvement projects.

The current nationwide demand for improved student achievement carries with it an emerging awareness of the importance of having good school administrators. Colleges of education are being chastised for not producing better leaders through their preservice programs. State departments of education are being called on to raise the certification standards for new administrators.

In addition, school boards are being pressured to hire—or retain—only those administrators who provide effective educational leadership. School boards also are being alerted to the need for training programs that will support and maintain a cadre of top-notch administrators.

Recognize the problem

In the next ten years, school boards will find it increasingly difficult to secure qualified school administrators. There will be no shortage of candidates clamoring to sit behind desks with titles after their names; individuals who possess the leadership characteristics essential to making schools effective centers of teaching and learning, however, will be scarce.

This anticipated shortage has been identified only recently and is being acknowledged slowly. A. Stafford Metz's conclusion (*Teacher and School Administrator Supply and Demand*, 1978) still is commonly accepted: "It is safe to conclude that there are no areas where shortages of educational administrators exist to any appreciable extent."

Metz's argument is based on the finding that, of the estimated 12,000 educational administrators hired in 1977, 6,400 (53 percent) were not employed as administrators previously. As long as positions can be filled—even if those hired don't meet important criteria for educational leadership—a shortage isn't acknowledged.

It should be remembered, however, that most administrators are drawn from the ranks of classroom teachers where quantity generally has been stressed over quality. Teacher shortages from 1950 to 1970 were met by increasing the numbers of college graduates willing to become teachers. In the 1970s, the critical need for special education teachers resulted in school systems sometimes hiring anyone who had the minimum special education certification.

A similar trend is evident today due to the shortage of math and science teachers brought about through massive exits to better paying careers. Also, highly competent women and ethnic and racial minorities now are able to enter fields that, until recently, were the province of white males. Even where academically able teachers are recruited, stress and teacher burnout take their toll, particularly on teachers who care. Moreover, retention is difficult due to school environments with few rewards for excellence or professional growth opportunities; school systems with teacher recognition programs usually have as a goal keeping excellent teachers in the classroom—not promoting them to administrative jobs.

One result of these influences is that the quantity—and the quality—of our teachers is adversely affected. Consequently, merely relying on the traditional practice of waiting for interested teachers to seek administrator certification will not produce acceptable results. School systems must intervene to ensure a steady flow of effective administrative candidates capable of meeting society's educational needs today and in the future.

Anticipate a shortage

As the present crop of school managers reaches retirement age, replacement will be necessary. The average age of school principals in 1980 was 45. Scott Thomson, executive director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), says that 30 percent of secondary school principals are between 50 and 59 years old. Secondary school principals average ten years on the job; approximately ten percent of the principalships turn over each year.

According to Samuel Sava, executive director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), elementary school principals stay an average of 15 to 19 years in that role; 70 percent of today's elementary school principals plan to retire before the end of this decade.

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Arthur W. Steller, superintendent, Mercer County Public Schools (West Virginia), frequently writes on education issues.

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Sava also has stated that 50 percent of all principals will retire in the 1980s. That projection, combined with an expected enrollment increase from the "baby boomlet," will create many vacancies for principals.

Plan for the future

Hiring good principals shouldn't be a matter of chance. *Filling* principalships, or other administrative openings for that matter, is relatively easy; often, an individual's personal characteristics along with the appropriate certification are viewed as sufficient qualifications.

What isn't easy is making sure that these administrators will be effective educational leaders.

John Goodlad, author of the recently published *A Place Called School* and a recognized authority on education, sounds the alarm for an end to the "haphazard" selection of principals. He calls on school systems to promote "... a continuous districtwide effort to identify employees with leadership potential." Goodlad also says that school systems must begin bearing the expense of training administrative candidates.

Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and author of *High School*, writes: "What we seek are high schools in which the school community—students, teachers, and principals—sees learning as the primary goal. In such a community, the principal becomes not just the top authority, but the key educator, too."

Unless serious and well-thought-out steps are taken, future high quality administrators such as those sought by Goodlad and Boyer will be members of a very exclusive club. Enlightened school boards are thinking long term and planning now for the next generation of school managers.

Unfortunately, the tide hasn't turned completely. According to Goodlad, the hiring of principals is "to say the least casual. Most new principals are plucked out of the classroom in June and plunged into the new job soon after."

Robert Dentler, professor of sociology and co-author of *Selecting American School Principals* (the result of a study by Abt Associates supported by the National Institute of Education), concurs. The school principal selection process usually is "ridden with change" and does not conform to sound policy. Dentler adds, "Patronage is still the conventional way of choosing principals."

Develop strategies

"It's nonsense to wait until you need a principal to start looking for one," says Goodlad. His research has revealed that the business community knows how to prepare for its future. Companies identify potential managers and make an investment in those people. According to Goodlad, this strategy "... requires a kind of planning that school systems traditionally have not done."

How should principals be selected?

An important step is identifying the principal's job responsibilities in a clearly written job description. Then, through research and experience, identify the special skills individuals will need to fulfil those responsibilities. A plan for identifying those individuals who meet the criteria, or who can be helped to meet them, can be designed.

According to Dentler, exemplary routes to hiring principals involve:

- internships
- leadership academies or executive training institutes
- traditional methods that have been refined.

Clearly, securing a position as a principal should involve more than good interviewing skills and state certification as an administrator.

Assessment centers can help

Corporations, such as Standard Oil of Ohio, Sears, Roebuck and Company, the Westinghouse Electric Corporation, and A.T.&T., have been using assessment centers successfully to select and promote managers. The process usually involves an intense period of time, often several days, during which candidates are subjected to "real life" job situations. The individuals are judged on their behavior and display of skills.

Some large school systems, such as Montgomery County (Md.) Public Schools, have been using this method for assessing principal candidates since the late 1970s. Within the last several years, more attention has been given to assessment centers within education circles.

NASSP has taken a leadership role in the development and growing use of assessment centers. Paul Hersey, who heads the association's assessment center project, says, "We can be between 80 to 90 percent accurate as to what people will do on the job."

In January, NASSP announced its plans to expand the assessment center project with funding support from a Danforth Foundation grant. The expansion will build on the current base of 21 centers in 18 states that has been established since the project's start in 1975. Approximately 2,000 individuals have been assessed, and over 400 school systems are involved. Systems using the assessment centers promise to use the center's ratings when selecting new principals.

Several centers have been created in cooperation with universities. In addition, the San Diego County Department of Education provides a regional assessment center for several local school systems. Florida's state legislature formed a state training program for principals. In New Jersey, the state school boards association has joined forces with the state principals association to create the New Jersey Assessment and Development Center.

According to Hersey, it takes about five months to establish a center. Administrative and operational plans must be developed, including deciding who will be assessed, how many assessments will be made each year,

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and how many assessment slots each participating system is entitled to. School systems set up a preliminary screening procedure, which includes as prerequisites for participation both certification and motivation. Sometimes, preliminary interviews take place.

Funding for assessment centers comes from a variety of sources. School systems often contribute, but state education departments, universities, and foundations also provide funding. It's cost effective to set up a center for more than one school system, and Hersey advises interested school systems to contact their state education departments, neighboring systems, and universities before requesting NASSP to establish a prototype.

What happens at an assessment center?

According to the NASSP assessment center approach, 12 skills are related to the most important characteristics of successful principals:

- problem analysis
- judgment
- organizational ability
- decisiveness
- leadership
- sensitivity
- stress tolerance
- oral communication
- written communication
- range of interest
- personal motivation
- educational values.

These skills are related to behavior; technical skills relating to such areas as school law or teacher supervision are not involved.

The assessment center process includes simulations, group decision making, fact finding, and a well-designed interview. The participating candidates for principalships are evaluated in each kind of situation according to the 12 identified skills. The ratings provide appropriate and useful information on which to base hiring decisions, and enable decisions to be made fairly. The participants also gain important information about their individual strengths and weaknesses, and are better able to plan for improvement.

Gradually, the emphasis in assessment centers is expanding from the basic selection of principals to include on-the-job training for administrators. NASSP's plans now include a year-long field test of its strategies for helping principals become effective leaders. Its Springfield Project provides a simulated school system in which participants build behavior objectives, practice skills, and work with a trained, nonsupervisory mentor. Hersey estimates that in nine months to a year individuals will be able to achieve their improvement goals.

Related programs

Harvard professor Roland Barth, a former elementary school principal, opened the Principal's Center in 1981. It operates out of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The Principal's Center is a voluntary membership organization ($100 annually) "dedicated to the personal and professional development of school principals and that of the many others—teachers, counselors, department chairpersons, housemasters and sometimes parents—who influence the character and quality of a school."

Workshops are held, sometimes as often as two or three times a week, focusing on themes selected by an advisory board of 20 Boston-area principals and four Harvard faculty members. Over 400 individuals have become Center members and support its commitment to "school improvement from within."

The University of Oregon's Center for Educational Policy and Management has organized the Research Based Administrator Training Project. Its aim is to link the work of researchers and those in the field by "the dissemination of research findings through administrative inservice education." The Center conducts seminars for administrators and researchers under the direction of inservice trainers, and also develops management training guides for professional administrator associations in Washington and Oregon.

Another program, Administrators-for-Change-Training (ACT), is the result of research by William Johnson (Ambassador College, Texas) and Karolyn Snyder (Pedamorphosis, Inc., Lubbock, Texas) into instructional leadership training needs of principals. ACT is based on seven instructional leadership tasks and functions identified by surveyed principals:

- school as an ecological system
- the changing principalship
- planning for school growth
- staff development
- creative problem solving in groups
- long-range school planning
- personal awareness.

Butler University's (Indianapolis) College of Education offers the Experimental Program for Preparing Principals. The preparation provides "hands-on" experience for teachers in a two-year program to develop such leadership skills as:

- self direction
- coping with challenges
- managing conflict and ambiguity
- the ability to diagnose, design, and evaluate.

Practical experiences include counseling, public relations, and managing conflict. According to program co-director Gerald DeWitt, in addition to developing a model for principal training, a primary goal is to have an effect on state certification requirements for principals.

Make a commitment

What should superintendents and school boards do to identify and prepare future principals?

First, make a commitment, through policy and action, to hire only those candidates who meet the criteria for the quality of principal desired.

Second, determine how candidates will be identified and helped to acquire or improve the necessary skills. Support those training programs that will meet local needs by identifying them in school board policy. These may include assessment centers, graduate school training, organization-sponsored programs, internships, and inservice.

Third, at budget time, remember that staff development needs fiscal support. For example, additional substitute teachers may have to be hired to enable candidates to attend inservice or out-of-town training programs. Or, the school system may find it necessary to pay for the graduate training of identified candidates. The costs, whether substantial or minimal, are an investment in the future.

Fourth, develop policy and a plan for evaluating principals to ensure that principals remain effective.

Finally, review, revise, and develop policies relating to such areas as recruitment, promotions, termination, incentives, and salary schedules. These policies support the school system's commitment to administrative excellence. ■